

## **BBC 'breached guidelines 1,500 times' over Israel-Hamas war**

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Coverage was heavily biased against Israel, report into corporation's output finds

The BBC breached its own editorial guidelines more than 1,500 times during the height of the Israel-Hamas war, a damning report has found.

The report revealed a "deeply worrying pattern of bias" against Israel, according to its authors who analysed four months of the BBC's output across television, radio, online news, podcasts and social media.

The research, led by British lawyer Trevor Asserson, also found that Israel was associated with genocide more than 14 times more than Hamas in the corporation's coverage of the conflict.

On Saturday, Danny Cohen, a former BBC executive, warned that there was now an "institutional crisis" at the national broadcaster and called for an independent inquiry into its coverage of the Israel-Hamas war.

Two leading Jewish groups, the Campaign Against Antisemitism and the National Jewish Assembly, added their voices to calls for an independent review, while Lord Austin, a former Labour minister, accused the BBC of "high-handed arrogance" for continually dismissing questions over its impartiality.

The Asserson report analysed the BBC's coverage during a four-month period beginning Oct 7, 2023 – the day Hamas carried out a brutal massacre in southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people and taking another 251 into Gaza as hostages.

A team of around 20 lawyers and 20 data scientists contributed to the research, which used artificial intelligence to analyse nine million words of BBC output.

Researchers identified a total of 1,553 breaches of the BBC's editorial guidelines, which included impartiality, accuracy, editorial values and public interest.

"The findings reveal a deeply worrying pattern of bias and multiple breaches by the BBC of its own editorial guidelines on impartiality, fairness and establishing the truth," the report said.

#### Downplayed terrorism

It also found that the BBC repeatedly downplayed Hamas terrorism while presenting Israel as a militaristic and aggressive nation.

It claimed that some journalists used by the BBC in its coverage of the Israel-Gaza conflict have previously shown sympathy for Hamas and even celebrated its acts of terror.

The report claims that a number of BBC reporters have shown extreme hostility to Israel, including BBC Arabic contributor Mayssaa Abdul Khalek, who is said to have called for "death to Israel" and defended a journalist who tweeted: "Sir Hitler, rise, there are a few people that need to be burned."

It also accuses Marie-Jose Al Azzi, a Lebanese reporter, of being anti-Israel after she reportedly described the country as a "terrorist apartheid state" in a post that was subsequently deleted.

Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's international editor, is accused of excusing Hamas's terrorist activities and comparing Israel to Putin's Russia, while Lyse Doucet, the BBC's chief international correspondent, is also cited for allegedly "downplaying" the

October 7 attacks on Israel.

The report singles out the BBC's Arabic channel, saying that it is one of the most biased of all global media outlets in its treatment of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

It identifies 11 cases where it claims the BBC Arabic's coverage of the war has featured reporters who have previously made public statements in support of terrorism and specifically Hamas, without viewers being informed of this.

Researchers analysed the BBC coverage over the four-month period to assess the portrayal of war crimes.

"Hamas members filmed and publicised themselves committing acts which appear to constitute war crimes," the report said, including the taking of hostages, wilful killing or murder, torture or inhuman treatment and rape or sexual violence.

But despite this, the report's analysis of BBC coverage found that Israel was associated with war crimes four times more than Hamas (127 versus 30), with genocide 14 times more (283 versus 19) and with breaching international law six times more (167 versus 27).

The report's authors noted that during the time period examined by researchers, Israel was accused of committing war crimes by South Africa in the International Court of Justice.

In the aftermath of the October 7 massacre, the BBC was widely condemned for failing to call Hamas "terrorists". In late October, the BBC said it would describe Hamas "where possible" as a "proscribed terrorist organisation".

However, the report identified Hamas being described as a "proscribed", "designated" or "recognised" terrorist organisation just 409 out of 12,459 times (3.2 per cent) over the four-month period.

The BBC said it would “carefully consider” the report, which has been submitted to Tim Davie, its director general, and Samir Shah, its chairman, as well as all its board members.

A spokesman for the corporation added that it had “serious questions” about the report’s methodology.

## Missile strike on Gaza

The BBC has been accused of bias since the Israel/Gaza war began on October 7 Credit: Ali Jadallah/Anadolu via Getty Images

On Saturday night MPs, peers and several Jewish groups expressed their concern at the report’s findings.

Sir Oliver Dowden, the shadow deputy prime minister, said: “The BBC is one of the premier news services in the world, and to hear that standards may be slipping in such a severe way like this, risks tarnishing the reputation of our news service.

“Serious questions should be asked as to why this has been allowed to happen, and licence-fee payers should expect to see the BBC stick to its own editorial guidelines.”

Julia Lopez, the shadow culture secretary, said: “Truth is the BBC’s currency in a world of increasing mis-and-disinformation. If viewers start to believe there is any agenda beyond its pursuit, they will rightly question ever more noisily whether the licence fee makes any sense in today’s rapidly changing media landscape.”

Greg Smith, another Tory frontbencher, said: “We knew in the aftermath of October 7 that the BBC was struggling to call a terrorist a terrorist.

“There are now clear grounds for Ofcom and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to use every tool they have in

their arsenal to bring about greater compliance with the rules around neutrality and fair coverage in the BBC charter.”

Lord Austin of Dudley, a former Labour minister who now sits as a crossbench peer, said that after spending decades defending the BBC, he is now “convinced” that its coverage of the current Israel-Hamas conflict “fails to meet the standards of impartiality and independence on which its public funding is based”.

Lord Polak, the honorary president of the Conservative Friends of Israel, said: “There’s a clear pattern. Other broadcasters have also made errors, but the BBC keeps getting it wrong. It’s shameful, it’s wrong and what’s worse – the BBC knows it.”

Laurence Julius, vice-chairman of the National Jewish Assembly, called for an independent review of BBC’s Israel coverage, saying: “The BBC as the world’s most influential media company with a global audience of over 500 million including influential thought leaders has a duty to report news accurately without bias or distortion and to explain the context. The BBC has failed abjectly and this is nurturing an anti Israel and anti-Semitic narrative across its network. It has to change.”

Gideon Falter, chief executive of the Campaign Against Antisemitism, said: “This report vindicates with empirical data what we have said – and the Jewish community has known – for a long time.

”Despite its persistent claims of impartiality and stubbornness in the face of complaints, the BBC’s ideological bias is now shamefully clear.

“The BBC should apologise for its biased and inflammatory reporting, but since the BBC has so stubbornly closed ranks and denied that there is a problem over the decades, the fundamental reform that is plainly necessary must come from outside. The answer to this report must begin with a transparent and unconstrained public inquiry.”

‘Great offence’

Russell Langer of the Jewish Leadership Council said: “Many in the Jewish community have become increasingly concerned

by the BBC's coverage of the Israel-Hamas conflict. In particular, the BBC's refusal to clearly label Hamas as a proscribed terrorist group continues to cause great offence. Some 11 months into this conflict, it is clear that the BBC is failing in its duty to cover this conflict impartially and can no longer ignore the evidence."

Trevor Asserson, a British lawyer who now runs Israel's largest international law firm, Asserson Law Offices, is a long-standing campaigner against BBC bias.

He described how his research into BBC bias during the Second Intifada in the early 2000s contributed to the corporation's decision to launch an internal inquiry into its coverage in 2004, which became known as the Balen Inquiry.

But despite calls for its findings to be made public, a report was never published, with the BBC going to court to keep the findings secret.

In 2005 the BBC commissioned an independent review of its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the final report citing Mr Asserson's inquiries into the subject.

Mr Asserson, who is launching a new organisation this week called Campaign for Media Standards which will scrutinise bias across the UK media, decided to conduct the research into the latest Israel-Hamas war following a suggestion from a client.

The majority of the work involved was undertaken pro-bono by his law firm, although an Israeli businessman based in London contributed to expenses and paid for external lawyers to contribute.

"The BBC's responsibility as a public service broadcaster is to deliver news without bias," Mr Asserson said.

"Our analysis reveals a significant deviation from this standard, especially in its reporting on the Israel-Hamas conflict, where the broadcaster showed a clear partiality towards one side. This bias was even more pronounced in the BBC's Arabic content.

“Such conduct not only breaches the BBC’s Royal Charter but also calls into question its suitability for continued public funding.”

A BBC spokesman said: “We have serious questions about the methodology of this report, particularly its heavy reliance on AI to analyse impartiality, and its interpretation of the BBC’s editorial guidelines. We don’t think coverage can be assessed solely by counting particular words divorced from context.

“We are required to achieve due impartiality, rather than the ‘balance of sympathy’ proposed in the report, and we believe our knowledgeable and dedicated correspondents are achieving this, despite the highly complex, challenging and polarising nature of the conflict.

“However, we will consider the report carefully and respond directly to the authors once we have had time to study it in detail.”

Reporters ‘showed sympathy’ to Hamas

Journalists used by the BBC in its coverage of the Israel-Gaza conflict have shown sympathy for Hamas and even celebrated its acts of terror, the Asserson report claimed.

Researchers claim that numerous local freelancers employed by the BBC have supported Hamas on their social media platforms.

The report also criticises Jeremy Bowen, the BBC’s international editor, for his reporting of the conflict, accusing him of excusing Hamas’s terrorist activities and comparing Israel to Putin’s Russia.

Lyse Doucet, the BBC’s chief international correspondent also comes under fire in the report for allegedly “downplaying”

the October 7 attacks on Israel.

The BBC has strongly denied the claims.

The report identifies 11 cases where it claims BBC Arabic's coverage of the war has featured reporters who have previously made public statements in support of terrorism and specifically Hamas, without viewers being informed of this.

The report accuses Mr Bowen, one of the BBC's most respected journalists, of bias against Israel, in breach of the corporation's editorial guidelines.

Mr Bowen, who is taking part in a BBC Masterclass on "reporting war impartially" next week, is accused in the report of "excusing Hamas terrorist activities" and of "stressing the callousness of Israelis".

The report claims that its analysis of a series of BBC Sounds podcasts produced by Mr Bowen and Ms Doucet between October and December last year showed an 84 per cent anti-Israel/pro-Palestinian bias, with only one section out of 33 graded as pro-Israeli.

It cites several examples, including a podcast last November in which Mr Bowen stated "Hamas ...an Islamic resistance movement...we've seen in the past few weeks has a military strategy" and a News at Ten report last October in which he said: "Hamas will try to use hit-and-run guerrilla tactics against a much more powerful army."

It compares this to Mr Bowen stating on a News at Ten report last October: "Israel has settled hundreds of thousands of Jews in defiance of international law", and in a podcast that month: "I saw the huge amount of force that they [Israel] have there and the massive amount of physical damage they've done, not to mention the loss of life. But despite all of that, Hamas are still fighting."

It claims Mr Bowen has also compared Israel's offensive in Gaza to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including in a BBC article in



November last year in which he stated: “Israel is on course to have killed as many Palestinian civilians in just over a month as Russia has killed in Ukraine since February 2022.”

It also accuses Ms Doucet of downplaying the horror of October 7 as the reason Israel launched its retaliatory offensive in Gaza, in a way which the authors claim “removes agency from Hamas” by saying that the war just “erupted”.

In one example, the report cites Ms Doucet stating in a radio dispatch in February this year: “And from the beginning of this Israel Gaza War, which erupted on October 7, it has been clear that both the United States and Iran do not want to be dragged into a direct confrontation”

A BBC spokesman said: “We strongly reject the claims that our reporters ‘celebrated acts of terror’ and we strongly reject the attack on individual members of BBC staff, all of whom are working to the same editorial guidelines.”